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Developers respond to St. Johns County's review of Outpost project with less homes, more buffer

Ponte Vedra Corporation has responded to a departmental review by St. Johns County staff of its controversial Vista Tranquila project, located on a piece of property in Ponte Vedra Beach known as the Outpost.

Disagreement between the county and developers over some land use issues has kept the project at more or less of a standstill for nearly four years.

The proposed Planned Unit Development is situated at the southern end of Neck Road, bordering the Guana River in the northern reaches of the Guana Tolomato Matanzas National Estuarine Research Reserve, or GTMNERR.

Opponents to the project, including residents of existing homes on Neck Road, have said Vista Tranquila would be anything but tranquil. They've argued further development would cause habitat destruction, contamination of the reserve's nearby waters, and result in a dangerous uptick in daily car trips on Neck Road, which would become the sole outlet for nearly 200 homes.

County staff provided their comments to Ponte Vedra Corporation on Feb. 27. At the time, the developer was requesting to rezone about 99 acres from Open Rural to allow for construction of 77 single-family homes. (The parcel in question is about 75 percent uplands and 25 percent wetlands and the applicant is not proposing to fill any wetlands.)

Responses provided by the developer on June 30 indicate the company, among other things, is removing all waiver requests from its application, increasing building setbacks and upland buffers, and decreasing the scale of its project by 11 lots, resulting in a total of 66 single-family homes.

In its responses, particularly to a staff comment regarding application of the property's conservation designation and requirements for compatibility with the area, the developer said its PUD design is "superior" to that of existing development on Neck Road.

The developer said this is due to the lower residential density, required central water and sewer connections, inclusion of a master stormwater drainage system that meets Outstanding Florida Water regulatory requirements and "substantially" increased buffers along the GTMNERR.

A May 18 letter written by Michael Shirley, director of the Research Reserve, on behalf of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, highlighted recreational uses within the reserve and expressed concerns for water quality.

Citing the letter in its responses to environmental comments by staff, the developer said Shirley's comments appeared to be directed more to the coastal area of St. Johns County in general, rather than to the PUD itself.

Shirley's letter made reference to impairments to portions of Guana Lake due to fecal coliform and excess stormwater pollutants, as well as fish kills potentially due to dissolved oxygen.

Without addressing any potential impacts, specifically from development of the Outpost property, Shirley said the reserve and the Guana River Marsh Aquatic Preserve recommended "that protecting and improving the water quality of Guana Lake be seriously considered in deliberating this decision."

The developer again insisted the scale and intensity of Vista Tranquila would be consistent with surrounding uses and denied there would be any adverse environmental impacts to operation or

management of the reserve.

The response continues: "Mere adjacency of residential homes to the GTMNERR boundary has never been considered by the County, the GTMNERR, nor the Comprehensive Plan or LDC to be 'adverse' to the GTMNERR or inconsistent with its use as evidenced by the County approval of lot development along Neck Road since the inception of the GTMNERR."

Ponte Vedra Corporation said traffic on Neck Road was not projected to exceed the county's minor collector road threshold of 2,000 vehicles per day, citing a transportation study prepared in June by representatives of the developer. The study says it accounted for the existing 116 dwelling units, as well as the projected added traffic of 30 vacant and developable lots, and the 66 homes proposed within the PUD.

The road's designation matters because the higher the traffic volume, the more standards to meet, meaning construction of upgrades to the road.

While part of the PUD is within 5 miles driving distance of the nearest fire station, the developer said there are about 5.23 miles of road distance between Fire Station 1 (in Palm Valley) and the southernmost boundary of the property. However, the developer also said even the farthest lots will still be "easily accessible" by emergency vehicles through the loop road within the PUD.

The developer said it will comply with the Level of Service requirements for fire services outlined in the Comprehensive Plan, including payment of the applicable impact fees.

Submission of the responses was the latest entry in the ever-expanding logbook of back-and-forth over the project between the developer and the county, along with organized opposition by the Save Guana Now group.

Developers brought a case against the county last year claiming officials were "stonewalling" their project by refusing to issue an administrative interpretation of the property's land use designation and by, instead, requiring an application for a Comprehensive Plan amendment — meaning a longer, more costly process that opens the door to further regulation — in order to move forward.

Ponte Vedra Corporation, a subsidiary of Gate Petroleum, said the county was dragging its feet, ignoring its own rules and denying the company's rights to develop its long-held property without any chance for appeal.

The suit was filed Sept. 12, just two months after the company's application for a PUD was submitted, but even that came after years without a formal determination by the county on the property's conservation designation on the Future Land Use Map.

On April 28, Judge Michael Traynor of the 7th Judicial Circuit Court signed an order holding the case in abeyance on the condition the County Commission hear the PUD application in a timely manner under the county's current Comprehensive Plan.

County spokesman Michael Ryan told The Record on Friday staff is reviewing the developer's responses and that a determination whether the PUD application is ready for prime time should be made in the next couple weeks.

He said if the responses are deemed adequate, hearings before the Planning and Zoning Agency and County Commission would then be scheduled. If the responses are deemed inadequate or require further questioning by staff, he said such feedback would be provided to the applicant to then take another crack at it.